



RHODE ISLAND
FEDERATION OF TEACHERS AND
HEALTH PROFESSIONALS AFT
AFL-CIO

To: House Finance Committee
From: Maribeth Calabro, President *Maribeth K Calabro*
Date: April 29, 2025
Re: **Minimum Staffing of School Social Workers**
Testimony in **support** of 2025-H 6045 (Rep. Shallcross Smith et al.)

The RIFTHP supports Representative Shallcross Smith's legislation to enact a school social worker staffing ratio of one staff for every 250 students. The legislation also provides a \$2 million appropriation for FY 26 to support the hiring of adequate staff to meet the staffing ratio. This legislation would ensure that every student receives the appropriate mental health support and educational services necessary for their success and well-being.

School social workers are essential to serving student mental and behavioral health needs. Their expertise is critical in supporting students who face emotional, behavioral, or learning challenges.

Rhode Island is facing a significant mental health crisis among its children and adolescents, with profound implications for the state's educational system. Data from Rhode Island KIDS COUNT reveals that 19% of children aged 6 to 17 have diagnosable mental health issues, and 10% experience substantial functional impairments. Alarming, only 22% of high school students reported receiving the necessary mental health support in 2021. rikidscount.org.

This crisis has tragically manifested in youth suicides; between 2018 and 2022, 12 Rhode Island youths aged 15 to 19 died by suicide. Additionally, in 2022, there were 3,265 emergency department visits and 2,271 hospitalizations of Rhode Island children due to mental health disorders. rikidscount.org.

In Rhode Island, this shortage is particularly acute. The state has recognized the need to address this gap, with Rhode Island KIDS COUNT advocating for dedicated funding to schools to hire and retain school social workers and psychologists. rikidscount.org

Students who do not have adequate access to mental health services often exhibit more behavioral problems, including increased rates of absenteeism, disruptive behavior, and social withdrawal. These behavioral issues can severely impact their academic achievement and overall school experience. Moreover, students with untreated mental health issues may fall behind in their studies and struggle with forming positive relationships with their peers and teachers, which can affect their long-term success.

The mental health crisis affecting our youth requires swift, meaningful intervention, and school social workers are a critical part of the solution. The data is clear: students need more support, not less. It is our responsibility to provide the resources necessary to ensure that every child can and will succeed in both their academic and personal development.

The RIFTHP urges you to support H 6045.

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